

HISTORY

Civilizing Siberia

THE SOURCE: “Unruly Felons and Civilizing Wives: Cultivating Marriage in the Siberian Exile System, 1822–1860” by Abby M. Schrader, in *Slavic Review*, Summer 2007.

THE YEAR 1753 MARKED THE enactment of a great reform in Russia under Empress Elizabeth: the replacement of death sentences with banishment to Siberia. It wasn't long, however, before the accelerating flow of criminal deportees into Siberia began to raise alarms. The authorities in Moscow, increasingly aware of the mineral wealth beneath the tundra, became concerned about the lawlessness of the new residents. Their solution was simple: Marry them off.

Russian officials confidently expected wives to solve the Siberian problem. But not just any wife would do, only “an idealized type of Russian woman who could transform unruly men into proper peasants,” writes Abby M. Schrader, a historian at Franklin and Marshall College, in Lancaster, Pennsylvania. The effort to achieve this miracle of domestication would consume the Russian overseers of Siberia for decades.

The drive to develop Siberian mining and to increase Russia's Asian sphere of influence virtually obliged the authorities to promote agriculture in the territory because transportation of food and other essentials east of the Urals was irregular at best and impossible for

much of the year. The number of felons transported to Siberia, while minuscule in the context of the vast territory, rose dramatically in the 19th century, from about 2,000 a year in 1816 to 11,000 in 1826. Nearly half were sent for the crime of vagrancy. Many soon became “parasites,” burdening the few settled farmers in the region who were trying to coax crops to grow in the challenging climate.

Unfortunately for Russian officials, their civilization strategy confronted a demographic roadblock: a lack of women. Females were outnumbered by between five and 10 to one in most places, and in Irkutsk, where some of the most impenitent criminals were sentenced to hard labor, the ratio of men to women was greater than 25 to one.

In 1832, the authorities decreed that wives of serfs banished to Siberia must follow their husbands, but many refused to go or were unable to stand the rigors of transportation. Administrators tried to marry exiles to women from “old-timer” Siberian families, but this too failed. Even bribery—the Irkutsk civil governor would pay 150 rubles to each father who wedded his daughter to a deportee—didn't work. And when some of the exiles, with the cooperation of the authorities, bought brides from the indigenous tribes, the resulting unions

weren't recognized by the Russian Orthodox Church.

Siberian officials tried to boost the number of women sent into exile, expecting that “their pure hearts, the domestic orientation of their attentions, and their submissiveness to patriarchal structures would enable them to bring out the best in the exiled men whom they married and hence reproduce Russian society in Siberia,” Schrader writes.

But the exiled women were imperfect material with which to meet the civilizing challenge, and there still weren't enough of them to go around. More than 40 percent were vagrants, 20 percent thieves, 11 percent murderers, and three percent arsonists, with most of the rest guilty of “bad behavior.” The presence of even a few women created a new source of criminality. “An exile frequently persuades another exile's wife to fornicate with him or he colludes with her to kill her husband,” reported the journal *Ministerstva nutrennikh del* in 1833.

Venereal disease spread. And even if the exiles managed to avoid contracting syphilis, “excessive and illegal sexual activity wore out a woman's reproductive organs and limited her contribution to Siberian colonization,” according to one document preserved in the Russian archives.

In the end, the use of proper Orthodox women to produce tractable peasants failed to turn Siberia into a reliable breadbasket. Even today, Siberia remains a frontier that the modern Russian state struggles to reconcile with the motherland in the west.